DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 076 RC 020 800

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TITLE The "New" Federal and State Education Agenda.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 11p.; In: Toward the 21st Century: A Rural Education Anthology. Rural School Development Outreach Project. Volume 1; see RC 020 797.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; Diversity (Institutional); *Educational Change; *Educational Legislation; Educational Objectives; *Educational Policy; Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Government; Federal Legislation; *Government Role; *Rural Education; Rural Schools; *School Role; Standards; State Government
IDENTIFIERS Goals 2000; *Systemic Change

ABSTRACT

Understanding the education agendas being promoted by state and federal politicians is critical in comprehending the factors affecting rural education. Equally important is developing an effective rural school improvement strategy that is viewed favorably by policymakers. Five areas represent the focal points of state and federal education agendas: (1) restatement and subsequent institutionalization of the national interest in education as evidenced by adoption of Goals 2000; (2) creation of a rigorous accountability system linked to federal funding that involves development of national standards for curriculum content, student performance, school responsibility for providing conditions necessary to achieve proficiency in the content standards, and teachers' and administrators' professional development; (3) emphasis on states pursuing systemic reform encompassing standards, curriculum, assessment and accountability, governance, professional development, higher education, finance, cross-agency collaboration, and diversity; (4) development of a national educational technology policy and creation of an Office of Educational Technology; and (5) renewed interest in addressing diversity in public education. Developments associated with state and federal education agendas will likely result in significant benefits to rural schools. For example, greater use of technology could improve instructional programming and staffing features of rural schools, greater involvement of postsecondary institutions could result in programs designed specifically for teachers and staff specialists working in rural school systems, and rural schools could become community learning and service centers designed to meet the needs of rural communities. (LP)

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ED 401 076

THE "NEW" FEDERAL AND STATE EDUCATION AGENDA

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The "New" Federal and State Education Agenda

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Introduction

The education agenda of the federal and state policy and school improvement communities is now fairly well formed. While debate continues to rage over some of the tactical features of this country's decade-old school reform movement, a political consensus about what ails education and how best to fix it seems to be emerging. Before addressing the agenda itself, however, I want to stress that attaining such a political consensus is what really counts nowadays and that the nature of the political actors involved in this consensus is equally important.

A new set of actors is calling the policy shots. To give some historical perspective, Timor (1989) suggests that the dominance in the 1960s and 1970s of the "old iron triangle," comprising schools of education, state departments of education, and NEA affiliates, has eroded—although it continues to have influence, especially at the state level. Guthrie and Reed (1991) emphasize the importance at the federal level of the "new iron triangle," which comprises education agencies of the executive branch, congressional committees, and interest groups (p. 107). And Spring (1993) argues that "the foundations, teachers unions, and the corporate sector" (p. 3) represent the "big three" interest groups in the field.

Yet, as helpful as these observations are, they appear to be incomplete in that they do not adequately acknowledge the relatively new and effective activism by state governors and state legislatures. These state-level actors—though not acting alone—are now extremely visible in establishing much of the nation's education agenda. If one subscribes to the adage that agenda-setting is one of the most effective forms of political power, then one can see that this shift in the locus of educational control to state and federal political actors is one of the most profound changes in education—not just in the past decade, but perhaps in the century.

The task is to uncover the agenda being promoted in *these* policy circles, and this task is especially important if we want to understand the forces affecting rural education. From our understanding of this agenda, we can frame a rural school improvement strategy that not only is effective, but also will be viewed favorably.

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The Focal Points of the "New" Education Agenda

I have singled out five areas that I believe represent the focal points of the education agenda:

- The restatement and subsequent institutionalization of the national (not federal) interest in education
- The redirection of the school reform movement, Phase I: new, more rigorous accountability
- The redirection of the school reform movement, Phase II: systemic reform of the educational system
- The development of a national educational technology "policy"
- The renewed interest in addressing diversity in public education

This short list contains few surprises, since the issues have been present for some time. Therefore, my use of the term "new" agenda should not be taken literally. What I mean by "new" is that approaches to these five areas suggest a new urgency, a new energy, a new commitment, and, in some cases, a discernible new direction.

Restatement and Institutionalization of National Interest in Education

The formal adoption in 1990 of the now familiar six national education goals by the governors and the President represents a turning point in the national interest in education. Most states soon adopted the six goals as state goals, with a number complementing these national goals with additional state-specific goals. At the federal level, the six goals became federal policy in the 1991 U.S. Department of Education report *AMERICA 2000: An Education Strategy*. They will be further institutionalized and perhaps even expanded as federal policy with the expected enactment of the Clinton Administration's major education proposal, Goals 2000: Educate America Act,[1] and the Improving America's Schools Act of 1993—the massive amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The institutionalization of the six national education goals as federal policy represents a fundamental expansion of the federal interest in education that historically has centered on the protection of civil rights and training deemed essential for the national welfare (the traditional role argued by Valente (1994)), or the enhancement of educational productivity, the equalization of educational opportunity, and the enhancement of liberty (the characterization of the federal interest preferred by Guthrie and Reed (1991)).

Clearly, one of the core features of the "new" education agenda is the pursuit of the six national education goals. The national interest in education thus has been broadened to include preparing children to come to school ready to learn (goal 1); an increase in high school graduation rates (goal 2); student mastery of content in English, mathematics, science, history, geography, and citizenship (goal 3); world class achievement in science and mathematics (goal 4); the eradication of illiteracy (goal 5); and the establishment of drug-free and safe schools (goal 6).[2]

[1] Since this paper was written, Goals 2000: Educate America Act became law.

[2] In the final law, goals were added to ensure professional development for teachers and promote parental participation. A copy of the goals as they appear in the law is attached.

Redirection of the School Reform Movement—Phase I

Certainly one of the core features of the new agenda that would be on just about everyone's short list is creating a more rigorous accountability system. The main tactics being employed to achieve this policy goal are quite familiar and include the following:

- The press for developing voluntary national content standards in the curricular areas specified in goal 3 of the national education standards
- A parallel press for the development of voluntary national student performance standards that are aligned with the content standards—i.e., measurement-driven instruction (MDI)
- A similar emphasis on the development of voluntary national opportunity-to-learn standards that will hold schools responsible for giving students the conditions necessary to achieve proficiency in the content standards
- A similar emphasis on holding schools responsible for giving teachers and administrators the opportunity to acquire skills and competencies necessary to provide meaningful instructional programs in the content areas

Mandates calling for these four rigorous accountability features are included in both the proposed Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. States will be required to honor the intent of these four features as a condition of eligibility to receive funds from the two legislative proposals. Together, these four approaches represent a major evolution of this country's decades-long struggle to create an effective accountability system in the field of education. While implementation issues have yet to be resolved, it seems clear that strong bi-partisan support exists for three of the four features and that this support is not likely to dissipate in the future. The exception is the opportunity-to-learn standards, which are opposed by some political actors, especially the National Governors Association.

Redirection of the School Reform Movement—Phase II

This country has gone through several well-documented phases in its now decade-long efforts to reform education. Emphasis in the early stage was clearly on the use of state mandates, followed in the late 1980s and early 1990s by a focus on restructuring.

Today, support for systemic reform is dominant. As Clune (1991) has observed, advocates of systemic reform argue that the focus should be on moving the entire system of education to higher levels of excellence. The central thesis of the systemic reform movement is that the policies and programs of all parts of the education system must be integrated if meaningful progress is to be achieved. That is, all parts of the system must behave as a system.

Though this basic premise has found widespread agreement, a broad range of proposals (a number of which are incompatible, at least to me) are being pushed under the rubric of systemic reform. This concern notwithstanding, perhaps one of the best short-hand ways to illustrate how the concept is being described is to cite a recent statement of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), *Building a Framework for Education Reform* (1992), which identifies eight high-leverage policy areas that states should consider in pursuing systemic reform:

- Standards/curriculum (e.g., create standards and develop curriculum frameworks and guidelines)
- Assessment/accountability (e.g., develop assessments tied to new standards)
- Governance (e.g., mandate or encourage site-based management or collaborative decision-making, put state and district services in the hands of school councils, and restructure the state education agency)
- Professional development (e.g., align professional development with standards, regulate the training and licensing of teachers, increase initial and continuing certification requirements, require professional development schools, and encourage K-12 and university partnerships)
- Higher education (e.g., engage higher education in reform and form K-12 and university collaboratives)
- Finance (e.g., redesign formulas to focus on excellence as well as equity, expand the definition of equity to include outcomes and opportunities, and shift more budget authority to schools)
- Cross-agency collaboration (e.g., provide incentives for health, social, and youth-serving agencies and schools to collaborate and increase family involvement in schools)
- Diversity/options (e.g., create and support alternative forms of learning and teaching, create more public school choices for parents, create more magnet schools, create "tech-prep" programs)

Many of the features of ECS's conceptualization of systemic reform enjoy widespread support in the national, state, and local policy communities. Moreover, some of its themes are already being implemented across the country.

Because of the loose way in which *systemic reform* often is defined, the term may become nonfunctional, like its predecessor, *restructuring*. The indiscriminate use of the word restructuring raised the legitimate concern that if restructuring means so many different things to so many different people, then it must mean nothing. As Elmore (1990) observed, "school restructuring has many of the characteristics of what political and organizational theorists call a 'garbage can' concept" (p. 4).

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss a number of the features of ECS's conceptualization of systemic reform, whether labelled correctly or not. It seems clear that there is strong support for the following:

- A restructuring of the governance of education, such as some form of site-based management, charter schools, the restructuring of local boards, and the restructuring of the role of the state education agency
- Restructuring of the way we prepare and certify teachers and administrators
- More meaningful engagement of postsecondary institutions in the school reform movement
- Greater collaboration between other youth serving agencies and education
- The continued search for parental choice options, such as both intra- and interdistrict choice and vouchers that will withstand constitutional challenges

National Education Technology "Policy" and Plan

The fourth major agenda item is the development of a national education technology "policy" and a plan for its implementation once enacted. With the accelerated pace of the advances in technology, which shows no sign of abating, the creation of an "information superhighway" is at hand.

Title III of the proposed amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act mandates that the U.S. Department of Education create an Office of Educational Technology and further charges the Secretary of Education to develop a cohesive, national, long-range plan to ensure the use of technology to promote achievement of the national education goals (H.R. 3130, p. 150). This pending action by Congress should facilitate the development of cohesive federal and state policies that place education in the middle—not on the sidelines—of the current debates over transmission standards and the funding, acquisition, and use of the tools of transmission.

That these debates are likely to be heated is a given. Of high interest in the field are questions such as who will define the national infrastructure necessary for creating the information superhighway, and where will education fit in these rapidly unfolding developments?

Addressing Diversity in Public Schools

The fifth and final issue on the short list of "new" agenda items is diversity. Two widely recognized aspects of this issue are changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the school-age population and pronounced differences in the socioeconomic status of children and youth. A third aspect of the diversity issue is the growing recognition that public schools should no longer be viewed as a monolith, but as a minimum of three distinct components: an urban component, a suburban component, and a rural component.

An awareness of the difficulties confronting large urban systems is certainly not new and has for several decades been the subject of a long list of federal and state fiscal measures and programmatic initiatives. But a renewed interest in addressing this issue is clearly apparent.

The unique characteristics of the nation's rural school systems also have been recognized for a long time by states that have supported special fiscal and programmatic initiatives to address rural school problems. At the federal level, rural school set-asides in some of the big-ticket federal formula grants began to appear in the late 1980s. Moreover, rural schools were specially targeted in still other recent federal initiatives. The most prominent is the "Rural Initiative" that provided additional monies to the regional educational laboratories to devote attention to rural education. As I have stated on other occasions, I believe that the best work in rural education is taking place in the regional laboratories.

Additional evidence of this growing awareness of diversity in public education is the decision by major national professional associations to create special rural task forces, rural caucuses, or rural and/or small school committees. Rural interests in a rapidly growing number of states are forming their own separately organized state groups to promote rural education. One of the principal reasons for the movement is the perception that rural, urban, and

suburban schools have such diverse needs that reaching consensus within the existing "umbrella" state interest groups is too difficult (Stephens & Haughey, 1993). A number of the states in NCREL's service region now have formally constituted rural interest groups. In my judgment, Minnesota and Iowa have two of the more outstanding of the 20 or more state organizations in the country.

The growing recognition of diversity in the public schools has contributed to rapid developments in policy analysis tools and techniques that will clearly raise the level of debate about diversity. We now have the ability, for example, to generate a relatively comprehensive socioeconomic, fiscal, student, staffing, and programming profile of every local school district in the nation.

Largely unresolved at this point—but an issue that will surely heat up in the future—is the use that is to be made of these technical advances. That is, to what extent will our vastly expanded ability to understand the uniqueness and sameness of public schools shape federal and state policies that are more equitable, adequate, responsive, and appropriate than they have been in the past?

Likely Consequences for Rural Schools

What are the likely consequences for rural schools of these five big agenda items? Will the rural districts in the NCREL region benefit in meaningful ways or will they experience further hardship as a result of these developments.

Forecasting, of course, is at best highly problematic. Nonetheless, let me share with you my brief prognostication of what the five agenda items mean.

My overall assessment is that rural education in particular will realize benefits if the scenario I have suggested plays out. That is, though there are several ominous trends that could exacerbate long-term, inherent problems facing rural schools, other developments not only have the potential for neutralizing the negative effects of these negative trends, but also offer new, highly significant positive effects.

Perhaps one useful shorthand way to illustrate why I am guardedly hopeful about the future is to concentrate on the concept of the institutional capacity of rural schools. My working definition of the construct is as follows:

> *A consideration of the governance, instructional, student, staffing, financial, and community support subsystems, will embrace most of the important indicators or measures of the health and performance of an educational organization.*

I will use this construct as a way to organize the following brief defense, which will consist of several lines of argument.

First, the renewed emphasis on creating a more rigorous accountability system that includes content standards and student performance standards will exacerbate long-standing problems facing many rural systems—problems that are inherent in small-scale operations. Moreover, the socioeconomic trends that continue to have an impact on rural America are alone sufficient cause of great concern in many nonmetropolitan areas. Nonetheless, the parallel

push for opportunity-to-learn standards suggests that we are entering a new era in which the accountability of local communities and the state, as well as the local district, can now be more clearly established. If this line of reasoning is valid, then I, for one, welcome the new accountability with open arms.

Similarly, developments noted earlier should not only offset the possible negative consequences of the development of content standards and student performance standards, but should have other benefits as well. Especially noteworthy for me are the benefits discussed below.

The first is the development of a national education technology "policy" that, as suggested earlier, could put education in the middle—not on the sidelines—of the activities that will create the information superhighway. Such a policy will greatly facilitate the use of technology for improving the instructional programming and staffing features of rural schools.

Another benefit is the growing pressure and incentives to engage postsecondary institutions in more meaningful ways in the reform movement. This movement has to be encouraging, especially if it results in the participation of more institutions of higher learning, designing both teacher and staff specialist programs to equip professionals better to achieve a rewarding experience in rural school systems.

Moreover, the tremendous push toward greater collaboration between education and other youth serving agencies, plus the advances being made in technology, should help achieve a goal that has significant long-term benefits for rural systems—the rural school as the community learning and service center. The potential benefits of this concept for sustaining a strong, healthy educational infrastructure in rural America seem indisputable.

Finally, I would single out the promise for rural school systems of our increased ability to describe diversity in the public schools. We now have the technical ability to test the costs and benefits of using any number of criteria to define a rural system. The lack of a common definition or small number of definitions has long hampered our understanding of the equity, adequacy, responsiveness, and appropriateness of federal and state policies and programs for rural school systems. It has led to pointless charges and countercharges that have resulted in little good. That more sophisticated inquiries of these types will now occur is accepted. Rural systems will be the big winners of these developments.

Concluding Comments

In this paper, I have attempted to do two things. First, I have provided a brief outline of what I believe are the five focal points of the "new" federal and state education agenda that occupies and will continue to occupy the attention and energies of the education profession. My short list, though sufficient to keep most of us busy, does not include other policy issues facing the profession that will also warrant attention. Omitted, for example, was mention of a host of instructional issues, such as ability grouping, graded classes in the early grades, the renewed controversy between the assimilationalists and accommodationists concerning the role of public education, and the early stages of the "Christian Fundamentalist Movement." And certainly the debate over

state school finance will have huge consequences for rural systems.

Second, I have observed that the five developments associated with the focal points of this agenda are likely to result in significant benefits to rural schools in the future. It is true that many foreboding signs have appeared on the horizon for rural schools. Nonetheless, I stand by my prediction that in the years ahead rural interests will witness substantial progress.

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